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'Lost' Red missiles

U.S. FAILURE to discover the location of three "regiments" of SS-20 intermediate-range nuclear missiles known or strongly suspected to be somewhere on Soviet soil has strengthened agreement within the Reagan Administration that early compromise with Moscow over the deployment of new U.S. missiles in Europe is impossible.

The three regiments, each with ten launchers for the three-warhead missile, are believed to be somewhere in Central Russia. The U.S. intelligence community is understood to be certain that the 30 missing launchers in three regiments are deployed in the field.

It is believed that they have been positioned for potential use against either European or Asian targets — which includes the mainland of Communist China and the Japanese islands.

The still-rising numbers of SS-20 missiles aimed at Western Europe are clearly identifiable in their shelters from spy-satellite pic-

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tures that regularly photograph them.

The missing regiments, however, have not been spotted, raising questions as to whether the Soviets have arranged new and unknown camouflage protection for them.

Indeed, the unexpected discovery in April of one additional regiment of SS-20s under camouflage signalled a warning to the U.S. that the presumed total number of SS-20s, around 360, may be far less than the actual number.

That was before the existence of the three phantom regiments was even suspected.

The impact of these phantom regiments on U.S. policy could be considerable.

With talks now resuming in Geneva on the NATO plan to start deploying the Pershing 2 missile as a counter to the SS-20s, precise knowledge of the number of SS-20s is obvi-

ously essential to the U.S. negotiators, headed by veteran diplomat Paul Nitze.

A just-published appraisal of these negotiations by the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee virtually rules out agreement with the Soviets this year "unless one or both governments propose meaningful shifts in their current... positions."

Soviet refusal to identify the precise location of the missing regiments is likely to harden the U.S. position.

Equally disconcerting to U.S. policy-makers is the strong indication that for each SS-20 launcher, the Russians are now believed to have up to five missiles, not the previously estimated two missiles.

If American specialists are correct on this point, it means that the Soviets now have more than 5000 SS-20 warheads available for use against Western European and Oriental targets: the initial missile plus four backups for each launcher.